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On the last battle

Beth Powning and her husband have fought environmental degradation from their New Brunswick farm since the 1970s. Only recently has she realized how one-sided the war has been

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BETH POWNING
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

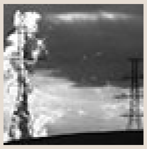
TANNIS TOOHEY/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO
New Brunswick nature photographer and author Beth Powning.

Thirty-eight years ago, my husband Peter and I moved to a farm in New Brunswick, where we still live. I am an author. These 300 acres are my Dublin, my Cabbagetown. I write of their particular frosts, winds, herons, owls, and grasses. Once foreign, these things are now comforting in their familiarity, part of me, and yet, in their deep, endless mystery, give me my creative animus.

In the late 1960s, amidst the vortex of counter-culture ideologies, Peter and I were inspired by some grand visionaries: Ruth Stout, and her organic mulch garden; Scott and Helen Nearing, and their book *Living the Good Life*; the agrarian writers of the 1930s; and classics like *Walden, Desert Solitaire* and *Five Acres and Independence*. Radicalized by Earth Day 1970, and by the exigencies of the oil embargo, we dreamed of wilderness - better yet, with a farmstead.

In the spring of 1970, we found such a place; an 1880s farm at the end of a valley in southern New Brunswick, 30 miles from the Bay of Fundy. With the fierce holy-mindedness of youth, we set to making our own "good life," choosing to become vegetarians; learning to weld, garden, build; eschewing pesticides;

Airsick



Last fall, Star photographer Lucas Oleniuk set out on an ambitious mission: To document environmental degradation in Ontario.

He came back with the basis of a haunting short film called Airsick, which documents the changes taking place around us.

milking a cow, baking bread, keeping hens, cutting wood; making pottery, writing short stories, starting a business.

The battles started almost immediately. In May, 1972, World War II fighter planes strafed our farm, roaring just over the house roof, unloading their white mist of fenitrothion at the edge of the pasture. The next day, the woods, as Rachel Carson had foreseen, were silent. No birds sang, no insects flew. Not only the budworm had been killed. A few years later, we sat beneath banners at Point Lepreau, conceding defeat, as the province's first nuclear power plant broke ground. When our son was a child, President Reagan came to power in the U.S. We were told that we could hide behind a lilac bush when the bombs fell. I stood on a float decorated with birch trees hung with white paper doves.

Watch Airsick: Flash | HD

Airsick inspired these original pieces by poets, essayists and an artist. Read more essays on our **Earth Hour page**.

My hands helped carry a wooden cruise missile down Saint John's King Street. Ever the earth, it seemed, was under siege. I was a member of the King's County Waste Disposal Committee. Choices, then, were between bad or worse. We walked pristine marshes, possible dump sites, listening to booming bitterns. Horrified, we knew we could not dump our garbage there. Or there. Or there. Touring landfills, I saw the growing disaster, the looming challenges.

Two years ago, I read Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers*. Half-way through, I put the book down, shocked, thinking how far short of our original intentions we had come, and realizing that the changes we'd begun to make, inspired by the recent "One-Tonne Challenge," were piddling. I ran my mind over our "good life." I went to the cellar, took the small amount of food from the old chest freezer, and unplugged it. Returned to the book and read to the end. Then I gave the book to my husband, and together we began working on Flannery's "must do" list.

On the list have been large and small physical things: new insulation; new windows and doors; air-to-air heat exchanger; a solar/wood water system. Replacements: new fridge and freezer; new (Smart) car. Abandonments: power lawnmower; clothes dryer; light bulbs. The list continues, on and on, growing as our commitment deepens.

On the list, too, have been less tangible things, yielding surprising riches. To eliminate long drives to the beach, we made a sand beach and built a screened gazebo at the pond. Instead of going to the Canada Day parade in the nearby town, we and our neighbours have made our own, with ponies, bicycles and dogs. In front of our house, rather than clipped grass, is a field of daisies, wind-stirred beneath the billowing, sun-drying laundry. I picked a year's worth of fruit. The woman on her knees beside me at the U-Pick sang, quietly. We talked, friendly, finger-stained. The engineer on the passing train waved as we picked apples in Penobsquis. People, at the new Farmer's Market, exchange friendship as well as goods.

In November, as cold darkness falls, I'm walking in our back meadow when, down by the row of old apple trees, I spot two moose. They stand stock-still, staring at me. I put my hand to my heart.

"Hello, guys," I say.

Not until five minutes have passed do the moose look away. Then they begin to trot, slowly, with gathering momentum, like ungainly Clydesdales, heads thrown back, shoulders hunched. I watch as they animate the dead-grassed meadow, and return it, with their absence, to a palpable emptiness. I, too, continue. I stop at the brook to look at the brown-stemmed bushes of the rhodhora patch, remembering June mornings when the pink orchid-like flowers were strung with spider's webs, dew-beaded, quivering with morning light. Moose, rhodhora, spiders - the land is deep, layered, alive with memory or possibility. Without such knowledge, learned like a language, the November landscape might appear to contain nothing more than brown fields beneath a darkening sky. But this place is home.

I pass the pond. A breath of wind corrugates the steely water. One raven flies over, and I watch it, worried, relieved. Lately, there are fewer ravens. I read their diminishment intently, as I read the frogs, and the swallows. Like the older generation, they are leaving us. Being displaced.

It's truly dusk when I reach the white farmhouse, snug in the hill's embrace, with its lighted windows. I turn, before going in, and look back the way I've come - east, at the forested hills. Recently, our friend Ulrich got his pilot's licence. One afternoon he came beetling up the valley in a tiny helicopter. It wavered down, landed just there, in the meadow. I climbed aboard. As we rose, swung, and then slid alarmingly down the sky, I pressed my forehead to the window, seeing, with shock, that stretching away as far as I could see, on all sides of our farm, the forest was either gone - clear-cut - or planted, like a market garden, in monocultural squares. The few patches of mature mixed forest were non-contiguous. Our farm, I saw, was an island in a ravaged landscape.

I can never get it out of my mind, now. How our place, which I have always thought of as a farm on the edge of lynx-haunted wilderness, is only a patch. A remnant. Haven, perhaps, for the beleaguered moose.

I know, now, what's beyond our own trees.

This battle is the last one.

Beth Powning is the author of three books of narrative non-fiction and of the best-selling novel The Hatbox Letters. She has published extensively in magazines and anthologies. Her next novel will be published by Knopf in April, 2009. She lives in Markhamville, New Brunswick, with her husband, the artist Peter Powning.